Coaching Principals to Develop Their Capacity as Instructional Leaders Insights from Two SEED Grants
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Background

Two U.S. Department of Education Effective Educator Development (EED), formerly known as the Teacher Quality Programs (TQP) division, grantees are providing job-embedded coaching to strengthen principals' roles as instructional leaders. The grantees are measuring the effectiveness of their approaches through multi-year grant evaluations that will be reported on at the conclusion of the grant work. This brief presents insights gained from the grantees' experiences and the lessons they learned over the course of implementing their coaching initiatives.

The brief is designed for EED grantees and other education leaders who are providing support to principals to improve their instructional leadership. Links to relevant resources are provided within the brief and in an Appendix.

Introduction

Principals play critical roles as instructional leaders in their schools (NASSP & NAESP, 2013), and in recruiting and supporting teachers. In a national survey of principals, nine in ten reported having a major influence on evaluating teachers while eight in ten had a major influence on hiring new teachers (Taie, Goldring, & Spiegelman, 2017). Given principals' influence and the importance of teacher quality for student achievement (Goldhaber & Hansen, 2013; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004), instructional leadership is a necessary component of a principal's skill set. Principal instructional leadership competencies typically include (but are not limited to): identifying mission and vision of school, programming and administering education, facilitating staff development, monitoring and assessing the teaching process, and creating and developing a positive school climate (Gulcan, 2012).

However, principals might not have acquired the skills, competencies, or capacities for instructional leadership in their preparation or credentialing, as pre-service training typically does not include job-embedded learning on how to influence student achievement (Reeves & Berry, 2008). Districts and their partners must often look to professional development and on-the-job experiences to support principals in their roles as instructional leaders.

Illinois State University (ISU) and Western Michigan University (WMU) are two universities working to fill this gap by supporting job-embedded professional development for principals. ISU and WMU received Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants from the U.S. Department of Education in 2017. Both grantees have focused on coaching as a primary strategy to develop principals' instructional leadership capacity and positively influence student learning.

ISU's program staff, TEAM Lead, uses its SEED grant funds to coach more than 100 principals across four regions in Illinois, and provides coaching in more schools through an Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grant administered by DuPage Regional Office of Education (the two programs are collectively referred to as Leading Ed Partnerships).These grants support principals' instructional leadership through

interventions focused on school improvement, time utilization, and distributed leadership. Coaches guide principals in developing and implementing a school-wide improvement process called "Cycles of Inquiry for Finding and Solving Student Learning Problems." Principals identify a student learning challenge and work with instructional leadership teams to review data on student learning and teachers' practices to identify the problem's root causes. They then work with a school leadership team to develop targeted solutions that address the root causes.

WMU's program, High-Impact Leadership for School Renewal (HIL Project), uses its SEED grant funds to provide coaching support to principals and teacher leaders in 76 elementary schools across 52 districts in western Michigan. Project staff members develop the instructional leadership skills of principals and teacher leaders, with a focus on improving students' literacy outcomes. A key focus of the project is fostering high integrity and high fidelity implementation and sustainability of the work. Coaches support principals in (1) guiding teachers and other staff through a process of assessing their schools' literacy strengths and areas for improvement, or "growth edges;" (2) identifying and prioritizing specific student and educator behaviors that address the high-priority growth edges; and (3) engaging teachers and school leaders in using real time data to monitor these behaviors and growth edges.

The following sections describe insights from ISU and WMU's experiences in:

- Identifying and selecting coaches for principals;
- Providing coaching support to principals, and
- Monitoring and supporting coaches to develop their coaching skills.

Identifying and Selecting Coaches

A coach's experience working with principals influences her or his credibility and readiness for coaching.

Both grantees found that a coach's background influenced her or his relationships and interactions with principals. The grantees' coaching protocol requires that a coach works collaboratively with principals to build the principal's capacity for instructional leadership. However, coaches who had experience supervising principals (for example, as assistant superintendents or superintendents) tended to be prescriptive in their approach to coaching. They were accustomed to evaluating principals and telling principals how to improve rather than having conversations with principals about the challenges they faced and co-creating solutions with them. The grantees had to reorient these coaches to their new role of building a principal's capacity as an instructional leader. In contrast, coaches who had experience supporting principals (for example, as instructional specialists) could build on those experiences to work collaboratively with principals or serve as a thought partner.

At the same time, coaches with supervisory experience often had "instant credibility" with principals, and had an easier time developing a principal's buy-in for working together. The perspective and experience gained as a principal supervisor made it easier for these coaches to establish credibility than it was for other coaches—principals tended to be more responsive to these coaches and their feedback. Grantees had to emphasize to principals that even though the coaches had supervised principals before, their role was not to evaluate principals. This was important because the success of the coaching depended in part on principals being open with their coach about their challenges and areas they needed to develop. Distinguishing the coach's role from the role of an evaluator allowed the principal

and coach to develop trust and rapport so principals felt safe to share openly with their coaches. The *Leading Ed Partnerships* project also addressed this concern by partnering with local Regional Offices of Education and university partners to hire the coaches. This helped to create a clear distinction between coaching and supervision.

The ability of coaches to sustain their credibility depended, in part, on their ability to develop mutual trust and respect with the principal. According to the *HIL Project*, the relationship the coach develops with the principal and the school's teacher leaders is critical. For example, a principal participating in the *HIL Project* noted,

> "The (coach) began with a well-designed plan of implementation and support…but definitely also allow[ed] our school to take ownership of the process…in a way that is meaningful to (us)."

A coach for the *Leading Ed Partnerships* Team noted,

> "I have never felt like I'm coming in with the answers. When [principals] invite you to do a walk through, attend a staff meeting, or observe the instructional leadership team and are hungry for feedback and say, 'Tell me what you saw,' that to me is where you build your credibility."

The mindset of a coach affects her or his willingness to learn and apply the coaching model.

The grantees found that a coach's' mindset influenced her or his success as a coach. For example, both grantees believed their coaching models relied on a coach having a growth mindset about both her or his own learning and the learning capacity of the principals being coached. The coaches with a growth mindset were more willing to learn how to implement the grantees' specific coaching models and more open to the grantees' efforts to develop their skills as coaches. When coaches applied a growth mindset to their work with principals, they recognized the need to build principals' leadership capacity and help them learn how to find solutions to their own challenges.

According to the grantees, another important aspect of a coach's mindset is the ability to listen to others' perspectives and co-construct ideas (rather than solely promoting the coach's own ideas or point of view). The *HIL Project* refers to this as "interdependent thinking," and it is important for the program's coaches because a key first step is listening to a principal to learn about the school's context and identify its core strengths and assets. The grantee's strengths-based approach to coaching is designed to build on the assets that principals and their schools bring to the work. This is also important because coaches should avoid viewing principals as needing to be "fixed," instead, building principals' confidence in their ability to influence the quality of instruction in their schools.

Leading Ed Partnerships assesses mindset during the interview process for coaches by having candidates respond to [a coaching scenario](). The scenario is based on actual experiences that coaches have faced in their role of supporting principals. The grantee uses a candidate's response to assess whether the candidate can identify the principals' strengths and recognize the need to gather information about the principal's leadership structure and context. The scenario allows the interview team to better

understand how a candidate approaches the coaching relationship and whether the candidate is willing to work collaboratively with principals.

Local stakeholders play a role in ensuring that selected coaches can meet local needs.

Both grantees give local staff a primary role in selecting coaches to ensure that the coaches meet local needs. For example, *Leading Ed Partnerships* matched each of its university partners with a Regional Office of Education to collaboratively hire coaches and pair them up with schools. (The coaches were formally hired by the partner universities.) The *HIL Project* engaged district leaders and local intermediate service agencies on selection teams that vetted and hired coaches.

The grantees believe the leadership and involvement of local staff in hiring coaches helped develop buy-in for the work among its district partners. In addition, involving them made the grant more sustainable in the long term by developing their ability to lead the hiring process without directly involving the grantees.

To ensure that hiring aligned with the grantees' coaching models, a clear structure was provided to guide local sites through the hiring process. For example, *Leading Ed Partnerships* gave local sites a variety of materials including a job description, a list of the key attributes of coaches, a tool for screening candidates' application materials (cover letter, resume, and application form), the mock coaching scenario, and interview questions with key indicators for assessing candidates' responses. They found that well-designed, competency-based interview protocols were critical for identifying coaches with strong leadership potential. In addition, using a protocol ensured a uniform hiring process and a common understanding among grantees of the skills, experience, and dispositions needed by coaches. The *HIL Project* provides detailed job descriptions and a guide that outlines expectations of coaches, coordinators, project staff, and school leaders. Local districts and their intermediate service agencies helped identify current and retired employees to create a strong pool of coach candidates that had the competencies and dispositions needed for the work.

Local educational leaders also played a valuable role both in recruiting districts and principals to participate in the coaching and developing their buy-in for grant activities. According to *Leading Ed Partnerships*, the Regional Offices of Education had strong connections with district superintendents and principals that allowed them to effectively recruit for the grant. The *HIL Project* took advantage of an existing network of 56 school districts in Michigan that were partnering on an effort to improve student literacy success. The grantee worked with this network in designing the project's literacy goals and plan for implementation to ensure its buy-in for the work.

Providing Coaching Support to Principals
A clear distinction between coaches and evaluators improves principals' buy-in for coaching.

The grantees observed that principals were wary of coaching when they viewed coaches as an extension of the school district administration. For example, some principals were concerned that coaches would evaluate their work themselves or influence their performance evaluation. A key step for building the trust of principals was emphasizing that coaches were not involved in evaluating principals and would not communicate with evaluators about principals' performance. This allowed principals to openly discuss areas for improvement and their instructional leadership challenges with coaches.

The coaches also developed the trust of principals by clearly focusing their role on supporting and complementing principals' work rather than trying to "fix" the school. The *HIL Project* uses the term "walking alongside" a principal to convey this collaborative and supportive approach to the principals and schools they serve. During the initial stages of coaching, the coaches build trust and establish a strong relationship with principals to provide a foundation for their work together. The coaches listen to principals to understand the contexts of their particular schools and identify and build on each school's strengths. Taking this time to develop the buy-in of principals for the coaching was important for meaningful participation. The *HIL Project* uses this approach to help principals and teacher leaders identify their leadership strengths and growth edges and trains coaches to use a gradual release process for building the capacity of principals and their school leadership teams.

A coach from the *Leading Ed Partnerships* project described this approach,

> "The minute I arrive at her building, [the principal] says, 'Take your coat off, here is some coffee, let's go walking.'" She would stop every staff member in the hallway and introduce me to them as her coach. When I suggested she could introduce me by my first name, she replied, 'I am intentionally calling you my coach. I want my staff to know that I don't know everything. We all need a coach. We are learning together.' That to me is the "alongside." Coaching is never one person leading the other. You are walking the journey together."

Alignment between the coaching and the district's principal evaluation framework can strengthen buy-in from principals.

Although there needs to be a clear distinction between coaches and district evaluators, the coaching should be aligned with the competencies and framework used to evaluate principals. The *Leading ED Partnerships* team found that principals' buy-in for the coaching was stronger when the coaching activities focused on the competencies addressed by a district's evaluation system. This alignment also supports the buy-in of district-level staff because it ensures the work of coaches will be consistent with the goals of the district's human capital system.

Aligning the coaching with the evaluation framework can also support coaches in prioritizing a principal's role as an instructional leader. Instructional leadership is often prioritized in the performance standards that guide principal evaluation systems, which gives coaches a basis for emphasizing this aspect of their work with principals. Grantees noted that principals are often focused on short-term, day-to-day administrative challenges in their schools and do not prioritize efforts to improve instructional quality. To address this, *Leading ED Partnerships*' coaches devote a little time to administrative challenges, but support principals in redirecting enough of their time to focus on instructional improvements that can directly influence student learning.

The *HIL Project* experience raises a potential caution about the link between coaching and the evaluation framework. Some principals involved in the *HIL Project* had concerns about state-level efforts to link performance evaluations to high-stakes accountability decisions. This led to hesitation from principals about coaching tied to their performance evaluations. However, the coaching can be used to support principals in building the evidence needed for their performance evaluations. Coaches can help

principals adopt leadership behaviors that support the school's goals and address performance evaluation criteria at the same time.

A framework and process for guiding school improvement supports principals' roles as instructional leaders.

Both grantees use a framework to guide principals in their role as instructional leaders (see box below). The frameworks give principals a structure for leading school leadership teams through the school improvement process. Based on their experience, the grantees emphasized a few key aspects of their frameworks:

- **Strengths-based.** The *HIL Project* uses a strengths-based approach; a coach begins her or his work with a principal by identifying the principal's strengths and the school's assets. The goal is to avoid a deficit mindset, in which principals define their schools by the challenges they face and not by the strengths that they bring.
- **Focused on root causes.** Using the *Leading ED Partnerships'* framework, a principal and her or his school leadership team identifies a student learning challenge and spends time examining its root causes. In particular, the principal guides the leadership team in thinking about any instructional practices that teachers are using which might be contributing to the learning challenge. This focus helps the principal and leadership team develop solutions that truly address the underlying root causes of a learning challenge.
- **Guided by data.** The frameworks used by both grantees rely on collecting and analyzing data to guide the school improvement process. For example, as part of the *HIL Project's* framework, principals review data on students' literacy to define the challenge and develop targets that would demonstrate improvement. In order to identify the root cause of the challenge, *Leading ED Partnerships* has principals and leadership teams observe teachers' instructional practices.
- **Distributed leadership.** A key goal for both grantees is helping principals build their school leadership teams' capacity to "own" the school improvement process. The grantees recognize the competing demands on principals' time and emphasize the need for principals to delegate some of the responsibility for roles that take away time for instructional leadership. The coach begins by developing a principal's understanding of the framework and providing guidance in leading the process. Eventually coaches focus more on working with principals to build their school leadership teams' capacity to carry the work forward and lead it.
- **Grounded in student outcomes.** Both grantees ultimately focus on improving student outcomes. Keeping the work grounded in student outcomes ensures that principals are focused on practical instructional leadership skills.
- **Adapted to local needs.** The *HIL Project* emphasized that coaches can help school leaders and principals understand how to apply leadership practices within their own school contexts.

The *HIL Project's* school renewal process. The *HIL Project's* coaches guide principals through a school renewal process (the *HIL Project's* term for school improvement) that involves (1) working collaboratively with teachers and school leaders to review their literacy outcomes; (2) identifying targets for improving literacy outcomes ("growth edges"); and (3) implementing strategies related to instructional practices, leadership practices, and school environment to improve those outcomes. The role of the coach is to help a principal develop the capacity of her or his school leadership team to implement a research-informed strategy with high fidelity and integrity to improve student outcomes. Coaches assist principals in developing four conditions in their schools—Positive Core, Collective Ownership, Evidence-Based Decisions, and Continuous Learning—that support and sustain this work.

***Leading ED Partnerships*' Leadership Framework.** *Leading ED Partnerships* engages principals and their school leadership teams in ongoing cycles of inquiry. Schools begin by examining student performance data alongside teacher instructional data to identify the root cause of the challenge and define the student learning problem. The leadership teams collectively analyze data on teachers' instructional practices and student outcomes. Next, a principal leads the team in developing a set of strategies that directly address the root causes. Coaches support principals in establishing the routines and structures to implement a cycles of inquiry approach. They help principals manage and prioritize their time through distributed leadership practices that engage instructional leadership teams in leading and scaling the improvement efforts school-wide.

Ongoing monitoring and support of a coach can develop her or his coaching skills.

Both grantees emphasize that coaching is a skill that needs to be learned. This is especially important because the grantees have a specific approach to coaching, and coaches need to learn and understand this approach. The grantees take steps initially to train coaches on the approach, but then focus on modeling the coaching strategies, monitoring coaches' progress and school implementation, and providing ongoing support to develop coaching skills and dispositions.

Both grantees use a combination of in-person workshops, one-on-one support, and webinars to support coaches. The grantees begin with an upfront orientation and then meet regularly with coaches to develop their coaching skills and support their work with principals. A key aspect of the grantees' approach is providing support to coaches that mirrors the support the coaches are providing to principals. For example, the *HIL Project* uses workshops for coaches to model the mindsets that coaches are expected to bring to the coaching: a growth mindset, a strengths-based perspective, and collaborative inquiry. During monthly trainings for coaches, *Leading ED Partnerships* models the protocols that coaches can use in their coaching sessions with principals (and that principals will ultimately use with their instructional leadership teams).

The grantees collect information on how coaches spend their time with principals to ensure the coaching is consistent with the program design. For example, *Leading ED Partnerships* requires coaches to complete a log after each coaching session to track how they spent their time with principals and whether implementation is consistent with their model. The coaching log is combined with other

sources of feedback to inform the development of group trainings for participating principals, and to keep district leaders informed. Grantee staff also obtain feedback from coaches on the challenges they face and their need for support. Similarly, the *HIL Project* uses a weekly work record where coaches report what aspects of the work they focused on and the support they applied as they engaged with principals and their schools.

The grantees have found that principals vary in their readiness for coaching and benefit from support that is adapted to the needs of the principals they coach. The grantees noted an inherent tension between ensuring standardization of the model across grant sites and customizing the coaching to ensure the work meets local needs. This requires a careful balance to ensure that coaches are following the core elements of the coaching model while adapting the approach to address the unique needs of a principal and school.

Looking Forward: Using Principal Coaches to Support Principals as Instructional Leaders

Coaches can provide valuable job-embedded support for principals. This support is important given that instructional leadership is highly complex and influential for student learning. Yet, principal candidates rarely experience job-embedded learning that equips them to meet the demands and realities of the instructional leader role. ISU and WMU's coaching strategies provide one approach to potentially offset some of the gaps in principals' pre-service training.

TQP grantees and other education leaders who are supporting principals by providing coaching to improve their instructional leadership might consider ISU and WMU's early implementation findings in the design of their own principal coaching positions. For example, flexible and growth mindsets might provide a set of key competencies to include when recruiting coaches and setting up

Key Considerations for Adapting or Extending Coaching Models to Improve Instructional Leadership

ISU and WMU identified some key considerations for adapting or extending their coaching models to improve principal instructional leadership.

- Coaches' credibility with principals and their readiness to coach in a collaborative way is important for coaches' effectiveness. Their credibility and readiness are strengthened when coaches have prior success as a principal and have experience in school and district administration.

- A flexible, adaptive, and growth mindset is critical to coaches' willingness to learn and apply the coaching model.

- Although ISU and WMU are university partners, both viewed district and regional involvement in the selection and support of coaches as important. Their hiring processes use structured and consistent practices that align to principal instructional leadership competencies.

- Clearly distinguishing between coaching and evaluation is important for building trust between coaches and principals and demonstrates to principals that coaches are there to support them, not hold them accountable for their jobs. However, when coaching is aligned to principals' evaluation system, principals are more apt to buy-in to coaching as it can strengthen their performance and demonstrate progress.

- The universities' coaching models were undergirded by frameworks that guided principals in leading school leadership teams through a school improvement (or renewal) process. Coaches used this process as the basis for developing principals' instructional leadership practices.

- Coaches need ongoing monitoring and support to develop their coaching skills, and ultimately, improve their ability to develop principals' instructional leadership.

coaching relationships separate from evaluation is a common-sense approach to keep the focus of the coaching on formative and improvement-based feedback. Building in systems of support for coaches to develop coaching skills, as well as defining what type of coaching model to employ, are considerations that education leaders may consider as they seek to strengthen and improve their principal support systems.

Further, education leaders might consider the school improvement strategy they incorporate to structure and focus the work of principal coaches and the capacities or competencies they want principals to develop. For example, ISU uses a leadership framework that includes a cycles of inquiry process and WMU uses an articulated school renewal process to frame and define the work of principal coaches and principals. Education leaders might consider district strategic goals and school level needs in defining their school improvement framework and use ISU and WMU as an example of how to guide the work of coaches and principals with an improvement framework.

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Appendix: Additional Resources

Illinois State University

Leading Ed Partnerships https://leadingedpartnerships.org/projects/about-us-eir-seed/

Leading Ed Partnerships Lead Coach Attributes
https://eed.communities.ed.gov//#communities/pdc/documents/18139

Leading Ed Partnerships Case Study Exercise
https://eed.communities.ed.gov//#communities/pdc/documents/18140

Western Michigan University

High Impact Leadership for School Renewal https://hilwmu.org/

HIL Project Implementation Facilitator Recruitment
https://eed.communities.ed.gov//#communities/pdc/documents/18142